

TIME
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SOUTH VIET NAM Too Good to Be True

President Nguyen Van Thieu saw it as "a very good achievement of our people and our nation." The results of South Viet Nam's one-man election were very good indeed—in fact, too good. According to the government, fully 87.7% of the 7.4 million qualified voters went to the polls last week, and only 5.5% mutilated their ballots to indicate no confidence in the Thieu regime. The President's swollen 94.3% vote ran absurdly far ahead of the 35% that he won in 1967 and the 50% that he had said he would regard as an adequate expression of popular support in this year's balloting. It even surpassed the 89% vote claimed in 1961 by Ngo Dinh Diem, boss of the tough, autoeratic regime that was toppled two years later by, among others, a young colonel named Nguyen Van Thieu.

The bloated Thieu vote was clearly unnecessary; without any jiggery-pokery, Ameriean observers in Saigon reckoned last week, Thieu could easily have come out of the election with 60% or 70% of the vote. "Maybe Thieu didn't want the results to be so blatantly in his favor," said a Western diplomat in Saigon. "Maybe his provincee chiefs just got carried away. But if you measure Ameriean policy in Viet Nam by that election, it flunked badly."

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the election was the widespread acceptance of the results. Or was it a resigned indifference? Spokesmen for the militantly anti-Thieu, antiwar An Quang Buddhists charged that Thieu had "killed democracy and given birth to dictatorship." Supporters of Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky urged the Vietnamese "not to recognize the faked results." But never before had Thieu seemed more firmly in command. Before the election, when Ky's people were raising ominous visions of post-election catastrophe, the CIA estimated that there was a 40% chance of a post-election coup attempt; now the estimate is closer to zero.

Ready to Die. Thieu is not quite home free yet. Though Ky's supporters have filed a taxpayer's suit charging that the election was an unconstitutional fraud, there is little likelihood that the returns will be invalidated by the Supreme Court; after all, Thieu can usually count on the loyalty of six of its nine appointees. Ky's men say that he is "ready to die in the struggle." Since the election, he has been cloistered in his heavily guarded mansion at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airbase, where he is doubtless trying to map out his uncertain future. On Oct. 31, Thieu will be inaugurated along with his new Veep, Former Senator Tran Van Huong, and Ky will be out of a job.

Meanwhile, Thieu has his own troubles. In coming weeks, decisions will have to be taken on a number of long-delayed measures, including a possible devaluation of the piaster, as the regime faces up to the hard economic realities posed by the U.S. withdrawal. Thieu can only hope that his second term will live up to the incredibly ingenuous assessment delivered by the State Department on his unhappy second election: "a Vietnamese solution to a Vietnamese problem." It was as if the U.S. had never been involved.

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Roberts, Chalmers

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Johnson, Lyndon

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Book Complements Pentagon Papers

By Chalmers M. Roberts

When the shattering events of Dallas transferred the problem of Vietnam to a new President, Lyndon B. Johnson did not stop to ask whether an American role in Indochina made any sense. He plunged forward in the firm conviction that it did because he saw it as a part of the larger postwar history he knew so intimately.

This is the dominant fact that emerges from the initial chapter about the war in the former President's memoirs. What The Washington Post is printing are carefully chosen excerpts from the memoirs, chosen to give the heart of Johnson's views without all the detail the big book provides.

One immediate question is how his version compares with that in the Pentagon Papers published last summer. The answer is that, in this initial chapter covering 1963-64, the two versions are not so much in conflict as they are complementary. This is the Presidential overview and it should be read as such.

Many of those whose views were so vital to the Pentagon Papers do not even appear in the Johnson account and there is only a passing reference or two to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the thoughts of its members. One point of similarity: the CIA in both cases appeared to be the most skeptical of success.

The former President writes in the prose designed for history; there is none of his famous informality, of the barnyard anecdote, even of the informal phrasing of his post-retirement television interviews with Walter Cronkite. Some points are skipped over; others omit much of the story the Pentagon Papers told.

Mr. Johnson never made any secret that he felt the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem was a mistake and he says so again. But he totally omits the detailed account of American responsibility in that coup. He limits himself to rapping the famous cable of Roger Hilsman on Aug. 24, 1963, as "a crucial decision" that launched two years of chaos in Vietnam.

The Pentagon Papers

show that President Johnson defined "neutralization" of Vietnam as "a Communist takeover" and that he instructed Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge that "your mission is precisely for the purpose of knocking down the idea of neutralization wherever it rears its ugly head . . ." In this chapter of the Johnson memoirs, however, the ex-President is content to declare that he believed "most thinking people" recognized that French President de Gaulle's "neutralization" formula would have meant "swift Communization" in Indochina.

At another point Mr. Johnson refers to a recommendation by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara to prepare for "certain border control actions." The Pentagon Papers disclosed that that term really meant "covert Vietnamese operations into Laos."

The Pentagon Papers created a major row in Canada with the disclosures of American use of a Canadian diplomat, J. Blair Seaborn. Mr. Johnson states that Seaborn "presented our views not as an advocate but as a dispassionate intermediary."

The Pentagon Papers, as The New York Times account presented it, had Seaborn conveying an "obvious threat." The point remains uncertain.

Finally, Mr. Johnson in this chapter once again vents his disdain for such sunshine patriots as Sen. J. William Fulbright, as he saw them. He is defensive as he has been before about his 1964 campaign statement that American boys should not do the fighting that Asian boys should do for themselves. He insists that the voters that year "knew what they were voting for," that they were not, in effect, lied to by a man who many came to believe was secretly planning to escalate the war while running as a peace candidate against Barry Goldwater.

All such points are fragments of history. None is likely to sway minds already made up one way or the other about the initial Johnson role in the war. Mr. Johnson now has had his say and the historians will have to sort it all out once the nation reaches the point where a dispassionate view becomes possible.

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Johnson

The Ultimatum to Diem 'Was a Serious Blunder'

This is the second of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

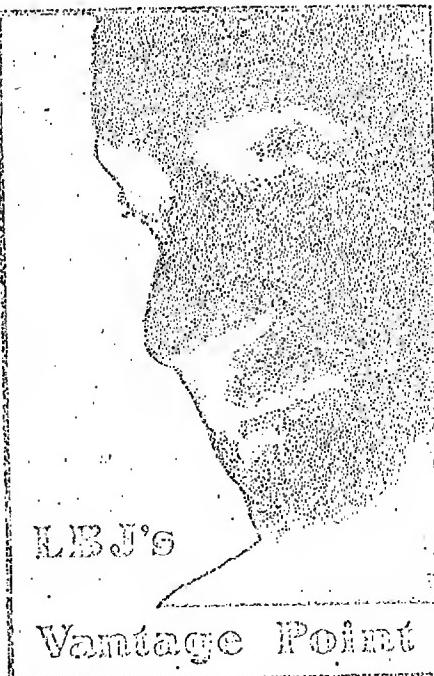
"STEADY ON COURSE: VIETNAM: 1963-1964"

As Air Force One carried us swiftly back to Washington after the tragedy in Dallas, I made a solemn private vow: I would devote every hour of every day during the remainder of John Kennedy's unfulfilled term to achieving the goals he had set. That meant seeing things through in Vietnam as well as coping with the many other international and domestic problems he had faced. I made this promise not out of blind loyalty but because I was convinced that the broad lines of his policy, in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, had been right. They were consistent with the goals the United States had been trying to accomplish in the world since 1945.

My first exposure to details of the problem of Vietnam came forty-eight hours after I had taken the oath of office. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge had flown to Washington a few days earlier for scheduled conferences with President Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and other administration officials.

Lodge was optimistic. He believed the recent change of government in Saigon was an improvement. He was hopeful and expected the new military leaders to speed up their war efforts. He stated that our government had put pressure on the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem to change its course. Those pressures, he admitted, had encouraged the military leaders who carried out the coup on November 1, 1963. However, if Diem and his brother Nhu had followed his advice, Lodge said, they would still be alive. In his last talk with Diem on the afternoon of November 1, Lodge had offered to help assure the Vietnamese leader's personal safety, but Diem had ignored the offer.

I turned to John McCone and asked what his reports from Saigon in recent days indicated. The CIA Director replied that his estimate was much less encouraging. There had been an increase in Viet Cong activity since the coup, including more VC attacks. He had information that the enemy was preparing to exert even more severe pressure. He said the Vietnamese military leaders who carried out the coup were having difficulties organizing



VANTAGE POINT

their government and were receiving little help from civilian leaders. McCone concluded that he could see no basis for an optimistic forecast of the future.

President Kennedy's principal foreign affairs advisers agreed that it was important to underline, especially within government circles, the continuity of policy and direction under the new President. I agreed and on November 26 approved National Security Action Memorandum 273. It was my first important decision on Vietnam as President, important not because it required any new actions but because it signaled our determination to persevere in the policies and actions in which we were already engaged.

NSAM 273, addressed to the senior officers of the government responsible for foreign affairs and military policy, began:

It remains the central objective of the United States in South Vietnam to assist the people and Government of that country to win their contest against the externally directed and supported communist conspiracy. The test of all U.S. decisions and actions in this area should be the effectiveness of their contribution to this purpose.

When a President makes a decision, he seeks all the information he can get. At the same time, he cannot separate himself from his own experience and memory. This is especially true when his decisions involve the lives of men and the safety of the nation. It was natural as I faced critical problems during those first few months

office, that I should recall crises of the past and how we had met them or failed to meet them. No one who had served in the House or Senate during the momentous years of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, as I had, could fail to recall the many highs and lows of our performance as a nation. Like most men and women of my generation, I felt strongly that World War II might have been avoided if the United States in the 1930s had not given such an uncertain signal of its likely response to aggression in Europe and Asia.

The spirit that motivated us to give our support to the defense of Western Europe in the 1940s led us in the 1950s to make a similar promise to Southeast Asia. The Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty was signed in Manila on September 8, 1954, by representatives of seven countries—Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and the United Kingdom—as well as the United States.

The Senate then approved the treaty by a vote of 82 to 1. The only dissenting voice was that of Senator William Langer of North Dakota, a long-time opponent of the United Nations, NATO, and other forms of U.S. involvement in the world. Among my old Senate colleagues who gave their advice and consent to SEATO that day were Aiken and Case, Fulbright and Gore, Mansfield and Morse.

I respect Langer, even if I disagree heartily with him, when he argues against our having any involvements in Europe or Asia or the rest of the world—and votes his convictions. I respect far more an Eisenhower or a Kennedy who sees our responsibilities in the world and acts to carry them out. I have little understanding for those who talk and vote one way, and after having given our nation's pledge, act another; for those who stand firm while the sun is shining, but run for cover when a storm breaks. The protection of American interests in a revolutionary, nuclear world is not for men who want to throw in our hand every time we face a challenge.

The failure to obtain North Vietnamese compliance with the Laot Accords of 1962 was a bitter disappointment to President Kennedy.

There was another reason the modest successes of late 1962 were not enlarged and multiplied in 1963. This was internal disruption inside South Vietnam in opposition to the Diem government and, especially, in fearful reaction to Diem's brother Nhu, who was quietly taking the levers of power into his own hands.